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Interview with Adisa Omerovic (FA 1137)

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Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.
Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.
Use of dash - indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.
Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.
Use of quotations “ ” indicates reported speech.
Use of *italics* indicates emphasis.
Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.
Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.
Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

[00:00:00]

AF: Okay, today is, um-

AO: [whispering] October 21st.

AF: -Wednesday, October 21st, 2015, and I'm Ann Ferrell and I'm talking with Adessa- that's not correct. Can you-

AO: It is.

AF: -pronounce your name for me?

AO: Uh, Adisa Omerovic.

AF: *Adisa* Omerovic-

AO: Yes.

AF: -I'm sorry about that.

AO: That's okay.

AF: Um, and I thought we could just start out, um, can you tell me about where you're from- ?

AO: Uh sure.

AF: -originally.

AO: I was born in Srebrenica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that's eastern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And I'm gonna keep saying Bosnia just because it's easier. Um, I was born-

AF: When you say eastern part-

AO: Eastern.

AF: Like, so that's almost like- where...

AO: [whispering] That's a good question.

AF: Eastern part.

AO: Eastern part-

AF: Okay.

AO: -yes. [AF laughs] Um, [clears throat] and that's where uh I was born August 2, 1991.

AF: Okay.

AO: Uh, just eight months before uh the war in Bosnia happened. Um, I have a younger sister, her name is Hasnija, she was born on August 23, 1993. Uh, she was actually born in the year of- a very hard year during the war, because the war took place from April '92, um, till the end of '95. Um-

AF: And were you still in Srebrenica when she was born as well?

AO: Yes, yes. And we were actually both born in Srebrenica. We were actually, our house was, um, in a smaller village, uh but the Serb, um, the Serbs they kicked us out of there beginning of '92, um, so we had to move down to Srebrenica, which was a safer part. It was a UN protected zone, uh, up until '95.

AF: Okay.

AO: And then um in '95, that's when- we'll get to later, when everything happened. Um, so we are, uh, the only two of my uh mother and father. Uh, my father's name is Mirsad Omerovic, um, he is uh he was born in 1968, and my mother's name is Zahinda Omerovic, she was born 1966.

AF: And where were they born?

AO: Uh, they were both born in um Bratunac which is, well Bratunac is like a county and then you have smaller villages. Uh, my mom was born is Sase, S-a-s-e, and my father was born in Sikiric, S-i-k-i-r-i-c. And in Sikiric, where my father is from, we actually lived just um across from Drina, and Drina is um one of the biggest rivers in Bosnia.

AF: Uh huh.

AO: Yes.

AF: Do you know how they met?

AO: Um, they met, this is a funny story, um, my mom had um, well her parents had nine, nine children. Uh, my mom was number eight, uh, and um, my uncle was number seven, so she was a second to the youngest. Um, my aunt, I believe number five, uh, she, you know they build houses back then, and everything was done, you know, with a family help. And my dad, um, was helping uh with the bricks. So he was, you know, making these, building these brick- red bricks, and my mom was at her sister's house, um, you know like helping them. So they met there, in, uh, '86, I believe, 1986. And all these years pass

by, they didn't see each other, so in 1990 they see each other at this, um, gathering, huge gathering, that you know, youth would gather at. Um, and my father, actually in I believe '89, he went to, um, like military, you- they had to serve um, every man had to serve military back then. Um, so they had like a party for, you know, uh, in front of this house, so my mom went there, um you know, to kind of like wish him look good and, you know, all his friends gathered. So he came back and in 1990 they, um, saw each other again and got married. Their twenty-fifth anniversary was just on October 19th.

AF: Oh wow.

AO: Yeah, so um, they met and got married in 1990, and then they had me in 1991.

AF: Wow.

AO: Yeah, yep.

AF: Love story.

AO: Yes, it is, it is. [AF laughs] She's, she's actually two years older than him, but you can never tell.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah.

AF: And so you said you were born, so where, where were they living when they got married?

AO: In SIKIRIC.

AF: Okay.

AO: Where my father is from, in the village that my father is from. So, um, I was born in Srebrenica, in the hospital, because they took-

AF: Wow.

AO: -uh, you know, took my mom there, which was, um, I don't know the exact mileage, but maybe up to twenty, thirty minutes with the car, um, car ride, and then they took, you know, my mom to the hospital to deliver me, um, and then we went back up, you know, in SIKIRIC, and we li- I was, you know, eight months old when the war started. But um, so I was born in August, and then uh the war started in April, in 1992, so we moved down to Srebrenica. And we actually lived, there were two houses across from the hospital that I was born in, we lived in one of those houses, um, as refugees. Um, as if- you know we were refugees ever since we left our own home.

[00:05:06]

AF: Right.

AO: Um, so we lived there, and then in '93 my sister was born. In '92 of October, my uh father's brother, um, he was killed because you, you know, he was trying to protect that zone, so the Serbs were still. So all those years, from '92 to '95, they were, you know, going around our villages, going around our cities, and you know, killing our men because back then men were, you know, they were so powerful in the house, you know? Uh, they were much respected from the women's side, and women's side too, women did a lot of, you know, stayed at home and did a lot of uh work in the home-

AF: Mhmm.

AO: -while men went out and, you know, provided for the family.

AF: Right. What did your father do?

AO: Um, he worked, he actually worked in Serbia, um, he was a truck driver. Um, so he's been a truck driver his whole life pretty much, ever since he's gotten his driver's license. Uh, but he was always set, I want to say, like, like he'd always find a way to provide for the family. During those hard years, you know, we had no food, we had nothing. He would find a way like to sell hi- his pair of boots or something for, you know, some uh flour so we can make bread. Or we didn't have sugar, like at the time my sister was born, we didn't have any sugar, we didn't have any salt, so he would go out of his way, you know, for days, and be gone for days, we wouldn't know if he was alive or dead, um, to come back home to bring us, you know, something, you know, some sugar. I remember, um, my grandfather, who was also killed in the war, his father, my dad's father, um, when we lived in that house in Srebrenica, across from the hospital, my sister, because she was- I guess it's because these kids, and I'm sure like when we go into this uh process of interviewing, I personally am going to get more children that were born in that year because I see a connection, like my sister, um, she loves bread right now.

AF: Hmm.

AO: Because it was something that was missing at that time-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -and she loves sugar, and salt, like she's crazy about salt. Um, so I think it affected them a lot, you know?

AF: Sure.

AO: Like they wanted something. But um going back to my grandfather, um, he would always get a um [clears throat] slice of bread, and then um pour some sugar on top, and then put some, put a few drops of water and that would be our dessert.

AF: Wow.

AO: Yeah, but that's something my- because my sister doesn't remember a lot, she was only two years old, but she remembers that.

AF: Wow.

AO: And the other side, I remember everything from even ninth- end of '93 up to today. So I'm glad I have that memory to, not necessarily to remember the bad things, but to teach people like that what really happened. You know just as I said back in the room, everything that's not on- that's on the news-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -it's not correct.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah.

AF: And that's something I hope we can talk about, if not tonight,-

AO: Yeah, definitely.

AF: -another time.

AO: Definitely, yes.

AF: And I wonder when you talk about your dad, and he, that he worked in Serbia, because as I understand it, obviously, you know, ten or more years leading up to the war-

AO: Mhmm.

AF: -things were already getting bad. Did he talk about what it was like, um, to interact with Serbs?

AO: He did, but really back then um [clears throat] there was a lot of what we call 'mix marriages,' um-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -with Serbs and Muslims. So a Muslim man would marry a Serbian woman, and um, up leading to the Nineties, that wasn't a problem-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -because people were so, I guess used to it, you know? But I guess when they started the war, like I think end of Eighties, um is when it kind of was like, "Oh no, he's Serbian," or "No, no, he's Muslim, or Jew," or something like that, "I can't, we cannot have contact with him," you know? Because Communism was just in the Forties-

AF: Right.

AO: -so we have a lot of people that lived, you know, that are alive still to this day that are very like, Communi- I want to say Communists, you know?

AF: Right.

AO: Because they, you know, they don't agree to religion, they don't agree to government, they don't agree to anything, you know? They just, you know, because Tito was alive up to I think eighty-something, I'm not sure of the year. [clears throat] But um, they were brought up, like our parents were brought up in that way of not fully communism, but part of it, because it affected their parents.

AF: Mhmm.

AO: You know?

AF: Sure.

AO: Because my grandparents, they lived during the communism, so it did affect them a lot. Uh, but my father he really, uh, he really didn't talk about it. He gets along with them even today, which it's something, it's very hard for me to absorb, because I know what they did, you know?

AF: Right.

AO: But I know that he has it worse than I do, he lived, he went through the woods for years to save his life, and you know his brothers and his friends, you know, they fought right in front of him and, you know, he was praying to see the next day, to see us, um, but I feel like I'm holding the grudge more than he is.

AF: Mhmm.

[00:10:04]

AO: I, I honestly just think most of these men that went through this, um, the older ones they wanna- they don't want to forget it, but like my father, he's very um, he's very forgiving, so I feel like he's gonna be more at peace if he says- he doesn't forgive them for what they've done, but just like, he's not gonna forget it-

AF: Right.

AO: -but he's gonna, some- to some point, forgive, so that he can be better at peace.

AF: Yeah.

AO: And like when he goes to Bosnia now, all his friends that he worked with, uh, back in Serbia, they come and see him. Which for me, like I'm very, like, "No, I'm not gonna do that." Like I don't want to see any of them. Uh, but I- like I went to school in Bosnia, I finished four grades in Bosnia and my, she wasn't my best friend, but my very close friend, she was Serbian.

AF: Really?

AO: Well Croatian actually, and uh, we got along pretty well, like we hold our friendships to this day. But I know, you know, I know my limits to, I guess not, not get too close, um, because they hurt us a lot.

AF: Mhmm.

AO: Yeah.

AF: Yeah, that's-

AO: But he didn't talk about, you know, I, I don't think that they saw it coming. Yeah, yeah.

AF: Which is really scary, to-

AO: Yeah, I would think, for me I'm like, "How do you not see some- you know? Especially if-" Well I guess that's something you can't really see coming.

AF: Yeah.

AO: You know it was all I- most of it was politics, involving religion, so.

AF: Yeah. How about your mother?

AO: My mom, what would you like to know about?

AF: How would you describe her?

AO: Uh, she is such a lovable person, like *everyone* loves her, every- she is, uh yeah, just yesterday, when I took her to her um, uh doctor's appointment, and because she doesn't speak English so I have to be there for translation. Um, she has uh type-2 Diabetes, and she smokes, so I keep telling her, "Do not smoke, this affects your, you know, results and everything. Do not." And sh- that's something, actually she started smoking after the war, because she was so stressed out-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -so she thought, "Here, I'll just take cigarettes and they're gonna take the stress away now." Uh, but she never smoked before, she started in '96, [clears throat] and she smokes to this day. Um, she's very lovable, and funny, and um, caring. Like she'll do anything, I feel, everyone in the neighborhood and uh, you know, across the country, people let me know. They're like, "Where is your mother?" Like, she makes great desserts, and everyone

whenever they come uh to our house, they are like, "Oh, what do you have for us?" And they're waiting for something, you know? [both slight laugh] And if she doesn't have something [laughs] they're like, "Well where is it?" [both laugh] Yeah, so she's, she holds her mo- emotions inside, she doesn't really show-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -a lot, and that's something she doesn't like to talk about, especially that, um, because her- she only had one brother, and actually, six of her sisters, six, six of their husbands, my uncles, they didn't survive. So, six of- she has watched six of her sisters, and none of them remarried.

AF: Wow.

AO: Because, you know going back to respect of men and-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -the women, back in the- of marriage, and um, maybe something that I don't agree to, you know, but I, you kinda, I have to put myself into their shoes.

AF: Mhmm.

AO: And see why my youngest, on my mom's sister, she was twenty-two at the time.

AF: Wow.

AO: She lost her husband, she just had a baby, just born then, and she never remarried. So here she is forty-t-

AF: Out of respect for her husband?

AO: Out of respect. She would- and uh, one of her friends or someone told her, well like a few years back, s- he said, "Um, you should, you should remarry," and she never spoke to him again. Because, she said, "I married my husband [AF: Wow.] because I loved him, and he was, you know, he was my soul. Uh, I, I don't even think about being with another man."

AF: Yeah. So that was for life for her?

AO: That was for life for her. And six of them actually, none of them got remarried. So my mom is very, [sigh] I want to say angry when she talks about it, because she's like, you know, "Six of my sisters are living without. You know, their children are living without fathers because of this." That's something she can't forget or forgive.

AF: Yeah, yeah.

AO: And I'm, I'm the same way, yeah.

AF: Are your aunts here? Or where are they?

AO: No, they're all, um, well actually one of them lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and she was left with four children. Two boys and two girls. [AF sighs] Um, they, thankfully you know, she raised them well.

AF: Yeah.

AO: You know those children turned out better than the one with the parents.

AF: Interesting.

AO: I, I think, I think because, and that's something I feel like that can be, um, like a hypothesis or something to be tested out, uh, i-i- it's, it's just amazing to me, because I guess they knew that they didn't have support. I mean they had support from their mom, and from all of us, but the, you know, they knew from a very young age that, "Hey, I have to fight extra hard-"

[00:15:05]

AF: Right.

AO: -because I don't have that male [unclear] in my life." So they're all doing very well. Uh, two of my aunts are in Switzerland.

AF: Mhmm.

AO: And three of them are in Bosnia.

AF: Ah.

AO: And one passed away in 2009.

AF: I'm sorry.

AO: But my grandma is still living, so she outlived her oldest child.

AF: Wow.

AO: Yeah.

AF: And where is she?

AO: She's in Bosnia as well.

AF: In Bosnia as well.

AO: Yeah, living with her son, my uncle.

AF: Okay.

AO: Yeah.

AF: Yeah.

AO: So it's, my mom's side is a big family.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah.

AF: Well what do you remember from Srebrenica? In terms of what it looked like, or felt like, or?

AO: Um, in Srebrenica I, I remember a lot of good times. Like my father he used to, he loves the outdoors, so he would, and I was his first child so um back then, uh, as you can tell, you know my uh grandfather and grandmother on my mom's side, they have nine children. They had six girls so they were pushing for a male-

AF: Mhmm.

AO: -because, you know, that was something very important to carry on the name, you know, to leave the land to someone. Um, and my father was never like that, um, he said, you know, "You're" -he says to me and my sister now, "You're my, you're my two sons," you know? Be like, "You're my pride and joy."

AF: Yeah.

AO: So I was his first child, he was so happy, and he was working actually in military at the time that, um, like in an office, something, I'm not sure which part, um, when they had me. And there's actually a picture of him working in the office, I, um, thinking of it now, uh we have it here, when they called him and they said, you know, "She delivered a-

AF: Wow.

AO: -um girl." And he was like all happy and in tears, and I have that picture.

AF: That's wonderful.

AO: Um yeah so he sa- he always kept me close, and my sister too, I mean he's like, my father is my best friend. Like he's the one I run to, um, every time I need some- not just need something, just want to talk too. I'm closer to him, but my sister is definitely closer to my mom. Um, but he would take me, you know, going back to Srebrenica, he would take me to like these little trips he has with his friends. For example, this was very funny, there was a, a hill right above the, um, like a mountain right above the hospital in Srebrenica, and his friends would gather and I remember, I think that might've been 1994 uh World Cup, uh in soccer, um, I think that was that year. Um, they had put up tents, and I remember two tents, one was yellow and one was blue. And I rem- mind you, I was only two years at this time, two-years old, um, and he took me there. Uh, in one, in the yellow tent we had a uh TV that we would watch that um World Cup soccer game in there, and then in one they had a set of sleeping bags and pillows, you know, and just, so they can sleep there. And he would take me on, up on his back, you know? And then um we would stop, you know, um, through the bushes just to take a breath, and then it's something that is very dear to my heart, because like he took me there.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Um, and then we came up there and some of his friends came on horses, and I think this is so funny. From a young age he has taught us to be strong, and you know, think you can do anything, so um, the hor- you know, these men come with horses, I, I just think it's funny. And there was a little river, like under the mountain there, um, he says, "Take this horse." I was three probably, two, three. He says, "Take this horse, let- you know, go get him some water." So here I am, I always- [AF laughs] I never said that's something they learn, you know they teach us in our culture, never say "no" to your parents.

AF: Right.

AO: You, you whatever they tell you, you've gotta do. [AF laughs] So I took that little horse [laughs] and then I took him, you know, to get some water and brought it up, and I was so proud. I mean I was afraid, I was a *child*-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -like three years old, but, you know, it's something that he has taught us, you know, just be strong and brave.

AF: Yeah. He thought you could do it and you did it. [laughs]

AO: Yeah, I did. And he was always like pushing at us. He's like, "Yeah, go ahead, do it, do it." Whatever- whenever we call him with a crazy idea, I tell mom and she's like, "No, no,

you can't," because she, she's not a big risk taker, where my father is. Um, so, I call him and he's like, "Yeah, go, sure, go ahead, just let me know when you'll be finished or something." But another thing uh, I actually have a scar from Srebrenica, it's right here. Um, and I believe in signs a lot-

AF: So on your forehead?

AO: It's right here, on my forehead, yes. [laughing] I keep forgetting we're recording. Um, I believe in signs a lot, you know like, you- from God like, uh, such a small world like, you know, Mr. Brent and Denis meeting in Sears and-

AF: Yeah.

[00:19:53]

AO: -Sears was my first work uh place, and then Denis works there-

AF: Wow.

AO: -and it's such a small world, you know?

AF: Mhmm.

AO: There's a reason like we all meet.

AF: Yeah.

AO: And um, in Srebrenica I was playing in front of the hospital there and my father was playing with my little sister, and my mom, she was doing- she was there uh sewing something, I'm not sure, sitting, um, and I remember I fell off on some rocks. I was sitting at this brick something, I'm not even sure what it was, like a big rock. And then I fell off on some rocks in front of the hospital and all they could see was, you know, my head down, kneeling down. Um, and my mom said, "Mirsad go see what's wrong." So he picked me up and there was just all blood, you know, coming out of my head. So my father thought, you know, something major. I mean there was a rock in here, so he took to the um hospital upstairs, and back then they had these big tables, like uh aluminum tables or something and uh, he put- the doctor put me on there, so I was like, "Oh my God, he's gonna like do something to me." [laughs] So he takes a pair of scissors, um, and uh, you know, he cleans that out, and ever since then I was always afraid of doctor, because I had that picture in my head. You know, he's putting me on a table, I don't know what he's gonna do, but my father was there, you know, to calm me down, and um, so that's another memory I have. Um, another memory I have is, um, my grandfather. I was very close to him, because, you know, we lived with them, and my father's father, and um, I keep having dreams of him, like every t- I mean, once a month at least, because it's something that I think about, you know, on daily basis-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -because this is the- that's the reason we're here, you know? So every morning I get up and I thank God that, you know, we are where we are. But um, another memory I have is he would take my anywhere. Um, like you know with the horses, he would let me watch the hors- the horses. He would, you know, um, take me with the cows, or something like that, you know? So, uh, but one hard memory for me is uh when they separated us in

Potocari, um, in July of '95. Um, we had to sleep outside, um, on whatever we had. Uh, but we had to, um, get a fire going, so my fa- uh grandfather, uh, started the fire there because it wasn't just us, it was hundreds and hundreds of other people. And my father had gone the other route, um, with other men, you know? To go through the- [door opens and a man says something]

AF: The fire.

AO: Yeah, yeah, okay.

AF: Okay.

AO: Okay so, when uh [microphone sound] we were forced to leave Srebrenica, um, we went down to Potocari. Um, Potocari, in Potocari you would find the um graves now, the memorial center, if you were to go back and visit. Um, where are all of their bodies, or bones I guess, are buried. Um [clears throat] but uh for those few nights we stayed in Potocari, my grandfather was there with me, um, and all- with all of the stress going on I remember uh Milošević, which he was the uh President of Serbia at that time, uh, he came over and he said, uh, "People don't worry, you will be transferred over to the safe zone," which was in Tuzla, um, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Everyone's going to get something to eat." Blah, blah, blah, blah, those promises.

AF: Yeah.

AO: And um, so we slept there, I remember sleeping there for one night. The next morning we woke up when he came over and said, "Okay get ready, you know, uh, we're transferring you over with the buses to the safe zone." So all of our mothers wanted to put us in our best clothing, and you know, our mothers just grabbed something that they could while, you know, it was shooting all over the place. Um, so my mom had this one dress that um someone brought to my um sister as a, like a baby shower gift, and my sister she's, she's a fashionista now, even at two years old, this- yeah, at this time, two years old, she knew that was her's, so mom put it on me and at that time my grandma had run down the hill to look for a cow to mil- you know, to milk the cow to give us the milk because, you know, especially for my sister. My mom wasn't eating enough so she really didn't have any milk-

AF: Right.

AO: -to breastfeed. Um, so she went down the hill, and at that time my sister started screaming because she saw the dress on me. She said, "Take it off! Take it off! Take it off!" And my mom said, "I'm not gonna take it off, I put it on her," because she knew that she was like selfish at that time. Um, she had on- these are little details I'm going in right now, but um, my sister had on little earrings, uh, that my aunt gave her. And um, you know like she was laying down on something, on grass, and here I was, you know, I was feeling so pretty, you know? I was four years old, and we're going to the safe zone, I'm gonna see my father, and I'm gonna see, you know, everyone that we said bye to. And um, the dress was red with white polkadots, um, it was a little like tulip skirt. [00:25:20] And she just kept screaming. While she was screaming, you know, the- there was these

Serb soldiers just like, you know, um, randomly spotted through uh the group of people, with the guns, the rifles, um, so she was grabbing attention so mom said, "Hush, hush, you know, don't grab attention." She didn't, she wouldn't be quiet. So my mom was under all of this stress. She doesn't know where her husband is, she doesn't know where her father is, she doesn't know where her mother is, she has two ch- children on her back, two old, you know, in-laws that can barely move, so she was just under distress. Um, and she did this, like I was uh standing there and I said, "No, I'm not gonna take it off." And then she pushed her with her right foot, just kicked her down, and she rolled, my sister rolled at that time, um, down the hill. And my mom says like, you know, "I can't, I can't worry about you [clapping sound] anymore." She wasn't really talking at that time, it was all the stress and everything that was going on, um, so a few minutes later my grandma comes back up with a glass of milk and she was carrying my sister, and she says to my mom, she said, "Child how could you have done this?" You know, like we forgot about, and she said, "I cannot deal with her with all of the stress," but again, it, you know, it wasn't really my mother, it was just everything that was going on. So when she got her back, and I think that that's why she's more close to her because she taught, you know, she had given up on her but now she gives her more attention. Not that she doesn't give me attention, it's just that I'm the older child and I'm used to whatever they went through, I went through, so I kind of kept everything from my sister. I didn't want her to feel what I was going through, just because I had to go through it to help out my parents.

AF: Right.

AO: So um then after that, they were telling us, "Line up," and we were going in these buses and they had two lines. The right line was for men, so they were separating as they wished, uh men, boys and men. Um, and then the left line they had a line of us, is for women. Of course there was more women because women had children and they were going with them. So any boy that was maybe like seven, eight years old, they pushed him over to the right side, and we didn't know where they were going. So my grandfather was going behind us and I remember, this is the picture that stays with me, um, I was going with my grandma, she was holding my right hand and my mother was carrying my sister, but I walked the whole way through. So from Srebrenica to Potocari, and then out of Potocari I walked. My sister, you know she was two years old, she said, "Mom picked me up, I can't walk." Uh, so I was carrying like a blanket or something to use later, um, and my grandfather, he was, he wasn't bald but he ha- he just had gray hair and gray beard, um, and he had on, I can't remember exactly the clothes uh that he had on, but it was something like fall colors. Um, and he had one a backpack uh with our pictures, our most memorable memories. [AF: Hmm.] Um, you know like my first uh, my first gift from them, like earrings and stuff like that. You know, just like, uh, memories that we had, he had that on his back. So it's like something told me, "Turn around," so I turned around and I said, [in Bosnian] like "Come, come," and he said, "No, you go ahead, I'll just stay back here." Like he wanted to make sure that we would get into the right lane of buses,

and then um, they separated us to the right and there was this Serbian soldier standing with a headband on his, uh, around his head, and uh, he said, "Oh, you old man, come here." And I started screaming at that time because my mom and my sister had already, they just stepped into the bus, and I was about to, you know, put my right foot [loud noise] up into the bus, and um, they said, "You old man, come here," so I started screaming and I said, "Don't take him away from me." And he said, "If you do not zip up I'm gonna take you with him." And my grandfather said, "No, don't, don't touch her, she's a child. Take me." So they took him, and my grandfa- my grandma took me into the bus and I passed out, because I was crying, I was crying *so much* that I passed out. [00:30:00] And then I remember waking up, like you- kind of like a blurry vision, I woke up and um they stopped the bus, and there was a young lady that just had a baby, she was breastfeeding her and this Serbian soldier comes inside and he, he's asking everyone for money. At that time I, you know, I was just a child, I'm like, "Where, where do you think these people are gonna have money? You just kick- like you just took everything they had." That's where the anger out of me comes, so he says, "Give me money, give me money." And this young mother said, "Child, I don't have any money, like I don't have anything." She was calling him son, like she was being really nice and polite, and she was breastfeeding with her left breast, and um, I was kind of like with blurry vision, so I looked over and my grandma was telling to, "Shh, hush," you know? And my mom was doing the same thing to my sister because we had no idea what they were going to do, because at this time they were raping women, they were cutting off everything, um, so they were just like, "Hush, hush, hush." So I turned around and she kept saying, "I don't have any money," and he said, "Well you do have money, you just don't want to give anything." And she said, "Son, I don't have any money." He takes the child like this and then he cuts off her left breast, right there in the bus, and the woman just passes out. And, and then I pass out again because I- it was just a picture that I didn't want to see. I don't know what happened to the lady, but someone else took the child, um, and then he walked out. But I woke up again, but when I woke up from that passing out again, I threw up, excuse me, but I threw up as a child and um, you know, the vomit kind of like went all over, but the driver, the bus driver, he was Serbian, so not all of them were bad. He was saying, you know, "Don't-" whenever we would pull up to a stop that they, um, would stop, he said, uh, "Don't say anything, like be quiet, you know, you don't want to grab attention." Like he was giving us hints on, you know, what they don't like.

AF: Right.

AO: Um, so, there was- when I woke up, you know, and when I vomited, my grandma, you know, like she poured some water on me so I can come, uh, to myself, and then um, I woke up and there was like this like huge, like a Mac uh truck, like huge yellow Mac truck, I think it was a Mac, I'm not sure, but they would carry um, uh they would haul um huge materials, like rocks, and um coal, and stuff like that. So he saw, it was probably a Serbian I'm guessing that was driving, you know, in the opposite direction. So he saw all

these buses coming so he wanted to come and get on us, onto the bus, to collide onto the bu- onto the bus, and the driver, again he was nice enough to pull- ser- you know, pull over, um, and we kind of went into this little ditch, but the uh right- left window where my mom was sitting, right behind the driver, all that glass shattered all over her.

AF: Hmm.

AO: Excuse me, and all over my sister. Um, and then after that I don't remember anything because I passed out again. Next thing I remember is waking up in a school, because they put us refugees there. You know, we were definitely refugees now, um, and that might've been like a few months after, but I don't remember anything from that bus up to when we went to the school.

AF: And where was the school?

AO: The school was uh over- it's called Previle, it's by Srebrenik, um, just like twenty minutes away from Tuzla, um, and Tuzla is one of the cities in um Bosnia. Uh, and then I remember waking up there and it was nice there because we had, we now had food, we had everything, but we didn't have our loved ones, my father wasn't there. Uh it was I think second day going on, and every morning they would prepare like breakfast in the cafeteria, and my mom, you know, she cared so much for us just like any mother would, she would wake us up and she said, "You know, go stand in the line, you know, to get breakfast," and you know I would always say, "Well co- you come too, you know? You didn't eat any." She said, "No, no you two." Um, and like right now I laugh about it but there was a lady there that gave me a banana, and didn't know what a banana was, I didn't even, you know, peel it, I was just gonna eat it like that, and my grandma, you know, um kind of like with shy attitude, she was like, um, "No, don't eat it like that, it's not like that. Peel it first." And I'm like, and I stood there, I'm like, "Why are you yell- you know, why are you yelling at me? I don't even know what a banana is," [AF laughs] you know? But the lady at, you know, she was from there, from the school working, um, and they were all very nice, but I remember all I could think of is "Where, where's my father? Where's my uncle?" His uh younger brother? So every morning I would walk down the steps, and then the third day I uh walked down with my mom and uh my grandma, my sister was sleeping upstairs. What they did was they put us in classroom, uh and uh, you know, they gave us some sleeping bags, and um-

AF: Like the whole, the family together? Or with lots of other people?

AO: No, with lots of other-

AF: Yeah, yeah.

AO: -people. Like there was maybe like five families in-

AF: Right.

AO: -one huge classroom.

[00:35:28]

AO: I just had a little sleeping bag, because we- you had, you didn't have anything else.

AF: Right.

AO: Um, you, you- we were definitely refugees at that moment, and um, I remember going down the stairs the third morning and it was like a movie shot. The, the school doors opened wi- wide open, and there was *man* that walked in, with a white shirt on, and it was my father. I skipped those steps, I, I didn't even co- because what I like to do when I walk up the stairs, I count them. That morning I didn't even co- I just jumped over and I ran to him, and he was a shot here, and he was shot here. Um, he was holding his right hand like this, but he grabbed me with his left one and hugged me so tight. And then first question I asked him was, "Where's uncle? Is he alive?" Which was his younger brother, and he said, "Let- give me a moment, let me take this in." And uh, he said, "Uncle is right behind me." So that was the best day of my life, knowing that my father was alive and he made it, you know, home safe. And then from then on it was just, we moved- this is our tenth home, we moved nine times in Bosnia. Nine times from, you know, village, towns, uh, all around, because they all wanted- everywhere you go they wanted you to pay something, you know? And at that time it was very hard to even *find* a place yet to have a job to pay fifty dollars a month for, you know, rent. Um, but just, you know, just kind of a broad description of how we got here.

AF: Do you know how your father found you?

AO: Uh yes, because what they did, um, they flew into- they came over to Tuzla, um, and then they were asking, because it was all like by word of mouth. So they from like one school or from one uh instead of where we were, um, and then like some- some is- some of his friends would be like, "Oh, I saw your children and your wife, they are in." So it took him, uh, he was in the woods for I'm not sure how long, how many days, I'm not sure if they even know that. Um, but we were waiting, and the wait time that took us, because they si- they pronounce that the- they have reached the safe zone, um, but we waited three days for him to come, so the third day. And there is a man here that I want to interview or Senida is gonna get him to interview, um, he's an older gentleman, he was gone for eighty-five days in the woods, seeking for help. Even after like ev- every- like at this time my father was home, all of these men were home.

AF: So were they hiding? I mean it was because they were afraid-

AO: They were hiding.

AF: -to come out of the woods, right?

AO: Yeah, yeah, because-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -you know, you don't know if someone is gonna come in-

AF: Right.

AO: -and wait for you, and shoot you there.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah, but you know, it... [sighs]

AF: Can I ask about your grandfather?

AO: Yeah.

AF: Because the last you mentioned is when you were separated from him.

AO: Yes, so we were separated, [sighs] we were separated, um, July 11th, his birthday was July, 10th, just the day before, and um, he was born in 1940. So we were separated in '95, um, that picture of him, you know, will stay with me forever.

AF: Mhmm.

AO: Um, but we didn't hear, we were, we were hoping, we were praying, but I forgot to mention, when we were leaving, uh, that place where the buses were, um, we turned around and there was like a whole pile of these backpacks, which is why when we did the march of uh peace here July 11th, we had the backpacks-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -to kind of symbolize that. What they did is when they were leaving [clears throat] the buses, getting them out of the buses, they uh told them to take off their backpacks. So they piled them up, and that was a sign that they were taking their personal things and just shooting them in a grave or something. And that's why when they discovered these mass graves, is it was all piled up, because it was just, you know, "Line up," and shooting.

AF: Shoot them, yeah. [whispers]

AO: And just on top of each other. But um, so we didn't know, we were just hoping. Um, I prayed everyday, and you know, I was a child just for him, I'm like, I always had hope that he would, you know because we heard a story there was, there was a man that was gone for eighty-five days and he just came out, so I was thinking, "Oh my God, like there, you know, there is still hope." So, like as a child, [clears throat] well even until now, I'm like, "Well maybe he's like somewhere in Turkey, or somewhere in Switzerland, or maybe under another name or something like-"

[00:40:14]

AF: Yeah.

AO: -you know, the survived. Well [clears throat] we came to the United State in 2002, and at that time I was eleven years old, uh, and then right af- you know my parents started working, and um, I had to learn English. I learned English with uh Barney, [both laugh] PBS Kids, that was my channel, on 24/7. But I came during the summer time, so school wasn't in session, so I had to find a way to learn English because I had to help my parents-

AF: Right.

AO: -with paying bills, you know? Finding an apartment, buying a car, all of that. Excuse me, um, so I would sit in front of the TV and watch PBS Kids, *Arthur*, *The Big Red Dog*, *Barney* [AF slight laugh], and I loved th- those shows, and then-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -once I started school, I started sixth grade here, those are the books that I would read, because, you know, I watched it so it would h- it would help me, you know? I heard the words before and then it would help see them-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -in writing. Um, so that was 2002 when we came here so I, I pretty much learned English within like two, three months. Um, I started school in August of 2002, uh, went to sixth grade, went to seventh grade, went to eighth grade, and then 2000- end of 2004, beginning of 2005, [clears throat] that's when they said like in those years someone can come visit from Bosnia, but none of my parents, even to this day, they're not U.S. citizens, but we're legal residents, we have our uh Green Card. Actually, I am a citizen now, I just got my citizenship a few months ago.

AF: Congratulations.

AO: Yeah, my sister is too, she got her's a couple years ago. But [clears throat] that's another issue our parents run into because they have to take the citizenship- the ship test, but they're not, you know, uh fluent in English.

AF: Right.

AO: So it, you know, a hundred questions of U.S. history, it's gonna be very hard for-

AF: In English.

AO: -them to learn. [door closing sound]

AF: Yeah. [high pitch sounds and footsteps]

AO: So uh, at that time, someone [door slamming] said, you know, someone can come visit you. So I was very close to my uh grandma, my mom's mom, and um, I said that I want her to visit. So we sent her like an invitation, and um, she got a six month visa-

AF: Wow.

AO: -a visitor's visit, to come visit us. So she came, and um, and this was just, so 2000- 2003- 2004, pretty much two years, going onto a third year that we're in America.

AF: Yeah.

AO: You know, my parents, not knowing any English, like right now going back to it, I'm very proud of everyone, not just our people, but everyone that comes here not knowing the English language-

AF: Mhmm.

AO: -and then being so successful, you know? Finding a job, first of all-

AF: Right.

AO: -with no English language, and then, you know, making sure you're right on time with- that's one big thing that they're um big on, being on time with their payments.

AF: In the U.S.? Ye- or, yeah. [laughs]

AO: Yeah, yeah. Like our parents, "Make sure you paid that bill on time."

AF: Right.

AO: "Make sure you-" because they're not, you know, they're very thankful for, you know, the opportunities that they get, they're like, "We're not gonna screw up this time."

AF: Right, right.

AO: Um, and um, so my grandma got that uh visa to visit, so she visited and then she left April of 2005, and I remember my dad had uh started driving, um, uh his own truck at that

time, and by the way, before we came to America, I can talk about our, um, how we came here, and the interview process another time, but-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -uh before we even applied here, um, his aunt was here living, uh, just a year before us, and she had sent us paperwork to say, "Here, apply, you have somewhere to stay when you come."

AF: Wow.

AO: She had a one bedroom apartment, uh, one bedroom, one bathroom, uh, with her two uh daughters.

AF: Wow. Where?

AO: So some of us-

AF: In what part of the United States?

AO: Here, in Bowling Green.

AF: In Bowling Green, okay.

AO: Yeah, in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Um, so she said, "There is no problem, I'll take care of everything when you come here, you know, settle down." Um, but my father said, "Can I drive a truck when I come to America?" [both laugh] And she said, "Yes, Mirsad, you can drive a truck, just come," you know? So we came and then my grandma left, uh, in April 2015 from her visit, so summer was coming and then I received a phone call from my dad, and we had a picture of my grandfather, uh, right, um, on the TV, a little small photo of- a frame and a photo, and um, so every time you, you know, you would be in the house you would see him right there.

AF: Right there. [whisper]

AO: And we lived in an apartment at that time and my father called, and he's such a happy person, um, I'm actually thinking about interviewing him in one of the interviews, um, because he, he takes it, he takes positivity out of the worst situations. Um, you know when I call him usually he's all excited like, "Oh, what's up?" You know, "What's going on? How was your day?" Like always so happy, like my sister says, "Every time I have a bad day I just call dad, [AF laughs] and just forget about the bad." [00:45:19] Um, but that day he called me and he just said, "Adisa, call this and this phone number. Get us two tickets to Bosnia, you and I, to be there before July 11th, we have to be there July 11th." And I said, "The only thing going on July 11th is the, uh, the big, um, burial every year." And uh, and I said, "Well what's going on?" And she said, "They found grandpa." So ten years later they had found, and before we came to America, uh, I think right across or something, they came and got DNA samples from my father, and his um mom, and his brother, to find, because you know they have to do these forensic science things, um, to match up the blood. He said they found grandma- grandpa, uh, and I said, "Okay," and at that moment like I just, i just did what he told me to do, like I didn't even process it at that-

AF: Right.

AO: -time. It hit me-

AF: You just got the flights-

AO: I just got the-

AF: [unclear] Yeah.

AO: -tickets, and we're going-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -and we're staying. So we left I think beginning of July, um, we were there July 11th, and it didn't hit, it really did not hit me until we were driving from Sarajevo to um Potocari.

Um, that I was going to bury my grandfather.

AF: Yeah.

AO: And we come there, it was my first time there because the memorial center just opened in 2013, um, sorry 2003, uh so just two years before that, and um, there was a lot of people there. So that was the third year, right? No, second year of the burial, well third, uh, 2003, 2004, and 2005, and there was six hundred and forty-six, I believe, um, people that were getting buried. Well not people, but their bones of what they could find in the mass graves. Um-

AF: The people they had identified, that many people?

AO: That is correct, yeah. The people that they had identified, and I think that was the correct number. And, um, we had come to, you know, they had dug up the grave and everything, we came there and I said, "This is really happening." just a few streets down, ten years ago, I said bye to him, you know? And I- even then, I was hoping like, "This is not true, like this is not true of- or this is not happening. Like he's somewhere alive, you know? He flew off somewhere." No, they brought his coffin, and um, watching my father bury his father was like one of the hardest things in my life.

AF: Yeah.

AO: It was very hard. You know, seeing um, especially in our cul- culture of men crying, it- you never see, uh espec- I mean I don't know how it is, you know, uh with other cultures, but a Bosnian man, when he cries, you know that he's hit- not hit the bottom but it's very hard for him.

AF: Right.

AO: And seeing my father put down, you know, and his brother, but their father down in the grave was- and I'm fighting, right now, emotions.

AF: Yeah. [whisper]

AO: It was so hard, um, but we finished with that and then we stayed um- I missed, I think I missed like two weeks of my freshman year in high school because I stayed-

AF: Yeah. [whisper]

AO: -there longer. I wanted to stay, um, longer, but you know, that was the story of my grandfather.

AF: Yeah, well thank you for sharing it.

AO: No problem. Yeah. And I can go, later I can go into, um, details of, you know, my father had just built a house-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -um, back in you know Sekovici, you know, by Drina, because he wanted something on his father's land.

AF: Wow.

AO: Yeah.

AF: Wow.

AO: Yeah.

AF: Yeah, we probably should stop but um I really look forward to-

AO: Yeah, definitely.

AF: -to talking with you some more, and I really-

AO: Definitely.

AF: -thank you for sharing with me.

AO: And I want to talk about more positive things, not just-

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah.

AF: You want to end with something positive? Something um about coming to Bowling Green? Or, or your-

AO: Oh yeah, Bowling Green, like it reminds me, it- I, as you know, I'm getting married in just a few weeks, um, thanksgiving weekend this year. Uh, Bowling Green was always like home when we came here, and I've traveled through United States a lot. I've visited California, one end of the U.S. to the other, um Florida, Texas, all of these places, St. Louis mostly, and there's about 70,000 uh Bosnians in St. Louis, and you would think it would make it like a little Bosnia, but coming to Bowling Green, it just takes us back, like home. I gue- I guess it's the southern hospitality, um, and everyone, there's been a lot of people that have moved here, uh, from, uh, northeast, uh to Bowling Green, because it reminds them so much of Bosnia.

[00:50:03]

AF: Yeah.

AO: Just because of the-

AF: The landscape you said too was the-

AO: The landscape, the southern hospitality-

AF: Yeah.

AO: -the people, the- or just because you can grow your own garden [both laughing] back of your house, you know?

AF: Yeah.

AO: Um, but definitely Bowling Green will always be, you know, a, you know, my home here. Um, I am moving to Hartford, Connecticut, hopefully for a short period of time, but it's definitely somewhere I want to come back to.

AF: Yeah.

AO: Yeah, definitely. And we're very thankful for, I mean, we reach the businesses here, you can just see how successful people are, it's because of that southern hospitality, and people here in Bowling Green that are willing to help. You know, even with WKU, with WKU we, you know, graduates from here and then those graduates are the ones opening up businesses, or-

AF: Mhmm.

AO: -um, reaching internationally, as we do. Um, there's a lot of WKU graduates that uh are studying abroad. Uh, my friend, not studying abroad but working abroad, he just came back from Germany after being there for four years-

AF: Hmm.

AO: -but he graduated from Western, so it's, it's a small world. It all kinda comes back to Bowling Green.

AF: Yeah, so you will come back to Bowling Green?

AO: I will come back, yes. [both laughing]

AF: Well we will talk about again before you go.

AO: Yes, definitely, definitely. [both laughing]

AF: Okay, thank you.

AO: No problem.

AF: And I'll stop this.

AO: Okay.

[00:51:21]